Light, air and openness: modern architecture between the wars


ABSTRACT

This book explores new ways of looking at modern movement architecture (c. 1920-40) in Europe and North America. It examines the relationships between modernist architecture and contemporary preoccupations with health and hygiene, fresh air and sunshine. I argue that such concerns, derived from social medicine and from the health reform and hygienist movements, were crucial to the development of a modern architecture in the early 20th-century. Through the discussion and analysis of individual buildings, including lesser known as well as more familiar examples, these issues are considered in relation to class and social control, luxury and austerity, race and colonialism.

With the three other submitted outputs, Light, Air and Openness forms part of a larger research and publication project to reassess 20th-century modernism and modernity through an examination of modernist art, architecture and design in their cultural and historical specificity. The book also addresses curatorial and conservational issues within a longer debate on the changing meanings of modernist architectures. These issues are also developed in the essay 'The Restoration of Modern Life: Intervar houses on display in The Netherlands' (Penny Sparke, et al. (eds), The Modern Period Room: The construction of the exhibited interior 1870-1950, London: Routledge, 2006) in which I examine the recent restoration and exhibition to the public of two major Dutch modernist dwellings, the Rietveld Schröder House, Utrecht, and the Sonneveld House, Rotterdam. Also in White Walls, White Skins: Cosmopolitanism and Colonialism in Inter-war Modernist Architecture; Mercer, K. (ed.) Cosmopolitan Modernisms, 50-68, inIVA, 2005, 1-899846-41-7.

In Light, Air and Openness, written in 2008, architectural historian Paul Overy demonstrated that many of the features of modernist classics, and much of the furniture and the trends in interior design, are a direct response to disease, and a belief in the healing power of light, air and openness. Sanatoriums exerted a powerful hold on the imagination of modern architects and designers as building types and institutional models. Combining associations of health, hygiene cleanliness (and easy-to-cleanness) modernity and machine like precision of operation, they were to have a major influence on modernist architecture and furniture design between the wars.